

The Presbytere, Jackson Square
New Orleans, Louisiana
Orleans Parish

HABS No. 18-5

HABS

LA

36. NEWOR

5-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District No. 18

Historic American Buildings Survey
Richard Koch, District Officer
614 Audubon Building, New Orleans, Louisiana

"THE PRESBYTERE" (State Museum)
Jackson Square New Orleans Orleans Parish
Louisiana

Owner

City of New Orleans
City Hall, New Orleans, Louisiana

Date of Erection

From 1795 till 1797 and 1805 till 1813

Architect

Builder

Don Andres Almonaster y Roxas (probably)

Present Condition

In fair condition, restored badly in 1934 by C.W.A.
Building was originally two-story and in 1850 a
Mansard roof was added. Interior re-conditioned in
1911 by Louisiana State Museum.

Number of Stories

Three

Materials of Construction

Foundation consists of cypress planks laid level
in shallow trenches as base for the walls. Walls
are of common red brick laid in mortar stuccoed
on the outside. Interior walls and ceilings are
of white plaster finish. Mansard roof built of
cypress and covered with slate. The ground floor
is paved with cement while other floors are of
cypress.

Other existing Records

L. J. Lowenstein, Times-Democrat, New Orleans, 1882
Rightors Standard History of New Orleans - Lewis
Publishing Company, Chicago, 1900 - p. 418
Pitts and Clark New Orleans Directory for 1838
compiled by John Gibson, Esq., in 1842
Norman's New Orleans and Environs - B. M. Norman,
1848 - p. 133.
Lyle Saxon's Fabulous New Orleans - Century Co.,
1928 - p. 278
Latrobe's Journal - Benjamin Henry Latrobe, D.
Appleton and Company, 1905.
In and Around the Old St. Louis Cathedral - Rev.
C. M. Chambon, Philippes Printery, New
Orleans, 1908
State Museum Archives

Additional Data

The Presbytere is situated on the corner of Chartres and St. Ann Streets and stands to the right of St. Louis Cathedral, looking from Jackson Square. It occupies a site of much historic interest in connection with the earliest history of Louisiana and in that respect is almost as important as the Cathedral and the Cabildo, with which buildings it forms a symmetrical group facing Jackson Square.

The Presbytere obtained its name from being that part of the church reserved as a dwelling for the officiating priests and it has retained this name, regardless of the fact that no priest ever lived in this house, but in a smaller and less pretentious one situated in the rear and facing on St. Anthony's Alley.

According to chronicles of early Louisiana history, the Capuchin priests erected a convent or monastery in the year 1726 on the site of the present building and this served as a dwelling for the priests. Evidently this monastery was destroyed or another building was added to the previous one. Rev. C. M. Chambon, in his book "In and Around the Old St. Louis Cathedral" says:

"In 1744 the citizens of New Orleans taxed themselves to obtain money for the erection of the Presbytere. The Presbytere was erected and there dwelt the Parish priest."

Apparently this building served continuously until

March 21, 1788, when a great conflagration destroyed almost the entire city, including the Presbytere. Following this the records are very vague and conflicting relative to when the Presbytere, the building which stands to this day, was built. The New Orleans Directory of 1842 notes that Don Andres Almonaster y Roxas at his own expense rebuilt St. Louis Cathedral, which was to a certain extent completed in 1794 and that he also erected a few years later the two buildings on the right and left of the Cathedral, namely the Cabildo and the Presbytere, all of which had been destroyed by fire in 1788.

This statement is erroneous, however, as far as the completion of the Presbytere is concerned. Don Almonaster y Roxas was a distinguished Spanish nobleman who came to New Orleans and amassed a large fortune. He held high official positions under the Spanish Colonial Government in Louisiana and donated large sums toward the erection of public buildings. Upon his death he was singularly honored by being interred in St. Louis Cathedral.

Don Almonaster completed the Cabildo in 1795, but there is nothing to substantiate the assertion that he also finished the Presbytere the same year. However, he no doubt made plans for the two buildings which he intended to be similar in design and symmetrical with the Cathedral, flanking it on the right and left.

Correspondence with the Intendant with the Supreme

Minister of the Royal Treasury of Spain, 1794 (Spanish Documents 4079 - Museum Archives) contains the following passage:

"Colonel of Militia Don Andres Almonaster offered to take charge of building it upon the same plan as the Curial is constructed, which occupies the other side of the church, with the idea of making the front of the plaza uniform, which in fact would beautify it so that they will form two equal wings to the Temple which is also about to be begun."

L. J. Lowenstein in his history of the St. Louis Cathedral, Times-Democrat, New Orleans, 1882, says that at the time of the acceptance of his proposal to rebuild the Parish Church, Don Almonaster

"also secured the contracts for, and built the buildings on each side of the Cathedral, at \$5000.00 apiece; the one on the left intended for a presbytery, now occupied by the Civil District Courts and the Civil Sheriff, and the one on the right for a town hall and jail, in which the Cabildo held its sessions."

This also would set the date for the erection of the Presbytere in 1795, the same as that of the Cabildo. However, an authentic letter in the form of a petition by the Church Wardens of St. Louis Cathedral in 1842, which is quoted below, and other evidence refutes the above statements that the Presbytere was completed in 1795.

It is however almost certain that Don Almonaster planned and started the construction of the building about 1795, and had raised it to the first arches when

the work was intercepted by his death April 20, 1798. The building then remained in an unfinished state for some years.

Relative to the above mentioned letter Henry Rightor, in his "Standard History Of New Orleans - Lewis Publishing Co., Chicago, 1900, p. 418 says:

"From a passage in the petition addressed by the wardens of the Cathedral in 1842 to Judge Maurian, of the Parish Court, praying for relief and protection from the usurping pretensions of Bishop Blanc, who claimed the right of appointing a curate to succeed the deceased Father Moni, it would appear that the presbytery, whenever begun, was not completed until after 1805. The passage reads as follows:

'When in 1805 the first Church Wardens elected by the Catholics took possession of the property and commenced the administration of affairs of the Church of St. Louis, the real estate belonging to it consisted of a space of ground situated on the left of the church, and comprised between Chartres, St. Ann and Royal and the continuation of Orleans Street. Said space of ground was at that time covered with small buildings of brick and wood of little or no value, and yielding but a small revenue. THE LARGE BUILDING WHICH IS IN PART OPPOSITE THE PLACE D'ARMES HAD ONLY BEEN COMMENCED, AND IN THE IMPERFECT CONDITION IN WHICH IT THEN WAS, BEING ONLY RAISED TO THE FIRST ARCHES, was used by being temporarily covered with boards by the person to whom it had been rented, and produced only a small annual rent.

Your petitioners and their predecessors, have caused to be constructed on the whole of said space of ground, all the brick buildings, several stories high, with which it is now (1844) covered, fronting on St. Ann and Royal Streets and on

the place called St. Antoine. The Presbytere fronting on St. Antoine Place has likewise been built by your petitioners. Before it was erected and up to the time of the death of the Reverend Father Antoine de Sedella, there was nothing but a small frame house, in which this worthy pastor resided, and he was the only priest attached to the church who was lodged at the expense of the Church.

THE LARGE BUILDING FRONTING ON THE PLACE D'ARMES HAS BEEN FINISHED AND COMPLETED BY YOUR PETITIONERS ACCORDING TO ITS ORIGINAL PLAN, and distributed in such a manner as to be conveniently occupied at first by private individuals, and afterwards by some courts of justice in this city. When the public desired that all the Courts sitting in New Orleans should be held in the same building, your petitioners both with a view to conform to the public exigency, and to derive a certain amount of annual revenue from the property caused important additions and alterations to be made to and in said building, so as to afford convenient halls for the session of different courts, and for the clerks and sheriffs thereof.'

This passage renders it certain that the Cabildo's twin building was erected, not by Don Almonaster, nor as has been asserted, by the United States Government in 1813, but by the Wardens of the Cathedral, at some period subsequent to 1805. Though of similar appearance to the Cabildo, its columns, wrought iron balconies, entrances, etc., will not bear rigid comparison with those of the older buildings. Its pediment is a flat plaster space relieved only by a medallion, while that of the Cabildo is ornamented with the American Eagle and piles of cannon balls, which no doubt replaced some similar emblem of Spanish Dominion. In 1850, probably about the time of the repairing of the Cathedral, the low flat roofs of the two buildings were ill-advisedly surmounted by French Mansards, which it is hoped will disappear under the restoring hands of the Architects employed by the Historical Society."

Louisiana 18-5
Page 7

Evidence that there was a lapse in finishing the Presbytere after the work was discontinued in 1798, was revealed in the brickwork, when the stucco was stripped off in the restoration work conducted by the C. W. A. in 1934. It was found that ^{at} the sills of the windows of the second story the character of the brickwork changed entirely, both bricks and mortar joints being different from those below, indicating that the work had been discontinued at that point for some time. The brickwork of the rear portion of the building was found to be different, indicating that this was the addition made in order to take care of the Courts.

The elaborate pilaster treatment on the sides of the building was added at this time, indicated by the fact that the pilasters were applied to a previously stuccoed wall on the older portion of the building while the pilasters applied to the new addition constituted an integral part of the work.

Latrobe in his journal published in 1905 by D. Appleton and Co., writes interestingly of the Presbytere, Cabildo and Cathedral as they were in 1819-20, when he lived in the city. He says:

"The public square, which is open to the river, has an admirable general effect, and is infinitely superior to anything in our Atlantic cities as a water view of the city. The whole of the wide parallel to the river is occupied by the Cathedral in the center, and by two symmetrical

buildings on each side. That to the west is called the Principal, and contains the public offices and council chamber of the city. That on the east is called the Presbytery, being the property of the church. It is divided into seven stores, with dwellings above, which are rented and produce a large revenue."

Latrobe's comments (page 185) are quite prophetic.

He says:

"I begin to understand the town a little, as a collection of houses; and a curious town it is. It would be worth while, and if I can find time I will try to do something of the sort, to make a series of drawings representing the city as it now is, for it would be a safe wager that in a hundred years not a vestige will remain of the buildings as they now stand, excepting, perhaps, a few public buildings, and of houses built since the American acquisition of the country. The three most prominent buildings in the city are the Cathedral, the Principal, and the Presbytery, already alluded to. They form the northwest side of the Place d'Armes. The Cathedral occupies the center, the two others are perfectly symmetrical in their exterior, the Principal to the south, and the Presbytery to the north of the Church. Although in detail these buildings are as bad as they well can be, their symmetry and the good proportion and strong relief of the facades of the two latter and the solid mass of the former produce an admirable effect seen from the river or the levee.

The construction of these buildings is curious. The foundations are laid about six inches below the natural surface, that is, the turf is shaved off, and logs then being laid level along the shallow trench, very solid piers and thick walls of brick are immediately built upon the logs."

A description of the Presbytere appears in the
Pitts and Clark New Orleans Directory for 1842, quoted from

the Directory of 1838, compiles by John Gibson, Esq.:

"The front of the building on the right of the Cathedral, looking from the public square toward it, is in the lower story in the Tuscan order, with a wide portion along the front of the edifice, supported by ten antae, of which the four in the middle are strengthened in front by Tuscan columns, and those at the angles by two clustered pilasters.

In the middle of the main building, underneath the portico, is the principal entrance; on each side of which are two smaller doors leading respectively to the offices of the Registrar of Wills, Court of Probate, City Marshall, Coroner, Associate City Judge and Sheriff, occupying the lower story. The ascent to the second story is through the principal entrance, which is composed of a semi-circular arched door, with antae at the sides, and Doric entablature, and opens into a spacious lobby, through which by a stone stair of a single flight below and double above, the second story is reached; on which communicating with a broad lobby in which the stairs dehauch, are found the Court Rooms of the Parish, District and Criminal Courts as well as the offices of their clerks.

The front of the upper story is of the Ionic order but generally similar to the lower. The entablature is surmounted by denticulated cornices, and the pediment is so relieved by an oblong shield."

The principal stairway of the building at the present time fits the above description as to form, but it is of wood and not of stone. It is not, however, the original stair. If the stone stair was ever in the building it must have been removed a long time ago, as the stair which preceded the present one ascended in two continuous flights along the rear wall of the long passageway which runs through the build-

ing from St. Anne Street to St. Anthony's Alley. These two flights met at a platform in the center of the second floor lobby. There was an intermediate platform half way up each flight but the direction of the stairway did not change. This stair was removed by the Museum about 1911 and the materials used in constructing the present one.

An evidence of the good construction of the building is the fact that although it has settled into the ground owing to the lowering of the water level by drainage, there are practically no cracks or disturbance of the walls.

Columns, pilasters, mouldings, etc., are shaped with brick by hand and are like all exterior walls stuccoed with a weathered buff colored cement. The interior walls, ceilings and cornice are of white plastered finish. The floor of the foyer is paved with 12" x 12" flag stones of a dark blue slate color, while the floors of all other rooms on the ground level are paved with cement.

All framing timbers and mill work throughout ^{ARE} ~~is~~ of cypress in almost perfect condition, as are the hand rails and turned balusters of stairways which are of mahogany. The iron work is interesting as it is all hand wrought and shows excellent craftsmanship, but cannot compare in design or workmanship to that of the Cabildo. The Mansard roof addition is entirely constructed of cypress, with plastered walls and ^eceilings. The roof itself is covered with blue slate 12" x 20" laid 7½" to weather.

There is a spiral stairway on the third floor ending with the roof, where they evidently intended to construct a cupola similar to that on the Cabildo. The arcade on the ground floor fronting Jackson Square was originally intended to be an open gallery. This gallery was enclosed in glass, but there are no records to show when this was done.

Typical of Spanish architecture, there is an enclosed patio in the rear; this is a later addition. The cheerfulness of the patio with growing palms and plants offers a charming contrast to the austere massive construction of the building.

It is not clear how long the building was in control of the Fathers of the Church after its completion about 1813, or when it was turned over to the Municipal Government. Lowenstein on page 52 of his history says:

"Of the block of buildings bounded by Royal, Chartres, St. Ann Streets and St. Antoine Alley, which the Wardens had erected upon the plot of ground at the left of the Cathedral, ONLY THE PRESBYTERY REMAINS TO THE CATHEDRAL. The Court Building was sold to the City and the other buildings were included in the transfer of the Archdiocese of the Catholic Church of New Orleans."

The PRESBYTERY referred to in this passage is not the building which is the subject of this sketch, but the one referred to in the petition of the Wardens as a dwelling for the priest that was erected in St. Antoine Place. The Presbytere was sold to the City in 1825, al-

though all the City Courts held their sessions there previous to that date as shown in the City Directory of 1822.

The Civil District Courts continued to occupy this building until 1911, when the building was turned over to the Louisiana State Museum for use as a Natural History Museum. It also houses the Law Library and the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Immigration.

May 17, 1935

Samuel Wilson, Jr.
Carl J. Helbak

Revised 1936, H.C.F.